

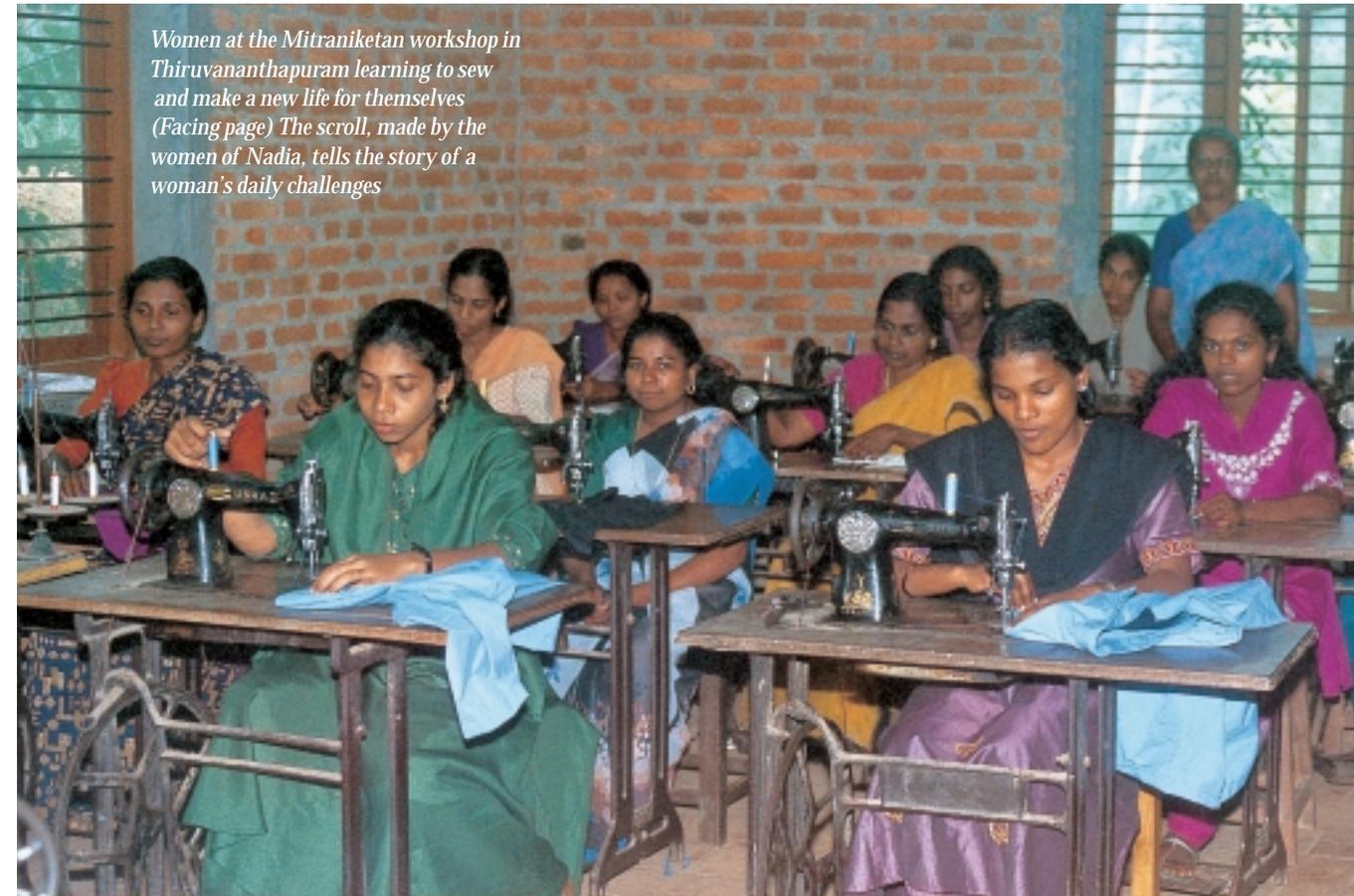
SUPPORT FOR NGOS MAKING A DIFFERENCE

India and the U.S. share many common goals, perhaps the most valuable being democracy and development. What is equally important to each is the commitment both countries have to civil society and supporting the role that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play in fostering these goals through programs and initiatives by voluntary groups. This is precisely what the Public Affairs Section of the U.S. Embassy in India had in mind when it has given grants to assist India in addressing community problems.

Theoretically, the program represents a relationship between a donor and a recipient. But the thread that holds this association together goes far beyond budgets and target objectives. It weaves two different views into an integrated approach. Women's empowerment, the eradication of poverty, child labor and illiteracy, along with the promotion of democracy at the grassroots level, are concerns addressed by the small grants program. With the modest support of the Public Affairs Section, a range of NGOs are tackling these issues. Not only do the projects help make an impact on the lifestyle of the targeted group of individuals, but they also encourage the beneficiaries to absorb the collective values of development, democracy and the empowerment of individuals in civil society. The grants help develop and strengthen the aspirations of those who are involved in and affected by the programs and this is evident in the faces of the thousands who have been touched by the results.

The district of Nadia is a prime example. One of West Bengal's poorest and most populated districts, Nadia is frequently prone to floods and other natural disasters. Fishing, farming and weaving help the villagers make

COURTESY: MITRANIKETAN



Women at the Mitraniketan workshop in Thiruvananthapuram learning to sew and make a new life for themselves (Facing page) The scroll, made by the women of Nadia, tells the story of a woman's daily challenges

MITRANIKETAN

ABODE OF CHANGE

IT IS THE HUMAN FACE OF DEVELOPMENT. THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN RURAL KERALA ARE CHANGED AS THEY LEARN NEW SKILLS AND STAND ON THEIR OWN FEET.

Mitraniketan literally means "an abode of friends." In 1956, when K. Viswanathan started the NGO in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, he wrote a new chapter in people-oriented rural development with its focus on areas such as agriculture, education, women's development and vocational training.

With a grant from the Public Affairs Section in July 2002, Mitraniketan started a vocational training program for rural women. Under the project, as many as 1,000 women were trained in cattle and poultry rearing, candle-making and tailoring.

During the candle-making and tailoring classes, the women

were taught according to the National Open School syllabus so that they would be eligible to sit for an exam under the vocational education program. The women were also eligible for a monthly stipend. But instead of accepting the money on a monthly basis, the women saved it either to buy a sewing machine, two goats or ten chickens at the end of the training. It was the realization of a dream, to become independent by making a living out of the skills they had learned.

In fact, K. Viswanathan, Director of Mitraniketan, observed, "The project will lead to an improvement in the quality of life of these women as well as sustain the skills and awareness acquired." This kind of program dovetails with Mitraniketan's endeavor to impart community-based education through participatory teaching methods. With the vocational skills acquired, the women trained at Mitraniketan now have the means to better their social and economic status. It is an important step towards women's empowerment—an issue that is of concern in both India and the U.S.

POWER THAT WORKS

AFTER A WORKSHOP, THE WOMEN LEADERS READILY TALK CRISIS MANAGEMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY.

It was the ravages of a war that resulted in the establishment of the Guild of Services. A group of social workers, moved by the plight of women widowed in the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, set up the NGO the next year to lend a helping hand. They realized that the root problem with such women, who were socially and economically dependent on others, was the insecurity about their lives. The Guild decided to focus on the empowerment and development of women in similar circumstances. And that's when the real battle began.

COURTESY: GUILD OF SERVICES

Women sarpanches chalk out programs



In the past 31 years, the Guild has undertaken four projects with the help of grants from the Public Affairs Section. While two of them focused on creating awareness about domestic violence, the others sought to strengthen democracy in villages. In August 2003, the NGO was awarded a grant to organize a workshop for women *sarpanches* (village heads). As many as 386 *sarpanches* came to Delhi to study constitutional law, social citizenship and crisis management.

Says Meera Khanna, Joint Secretary, Guild of Services: "We had organized a similar program in Mathura. But it was on a smaller scale, involving 100 women. This one needed more funds and the American Center chipped in." The women brought up social issues, from child marriages and Sati to sexual harassment, and sought answers on how to deal with them. They also created a federation of women *sarpanches* so that they could work together as a group. Says Khanna, "We are careful about the source of our funding and we have never had any ideological interference from the donors. Our goal is the same—to empower women."

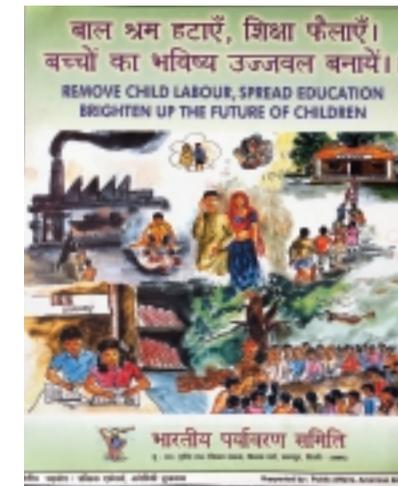
ends meet. To help the village women become more independent and organize themselves into self-help groups, a Calcutta-based NGO, Sreema Mahila Samiti, applied for a grant from the Public Affairs Section. With the grant, more than 100 women were taught how to access and use micro-credit and other economic and social opportunities. The Public Affairs Section's goal is to support projects that develop a momentum of their own and, in turn, strengthen civil society. Successful programs do not end by benefiting a few people, but rather they succeed because the positive impact carries on long after the grant money is spent. The women of Nadia learned how to work collectively to become more independent and improve their living conditions, both economically and socially.

Now, among the official records at the Embassy in New Delhi is a 30-foot-long picture scroll. Made by the women of Nadia who had been helped by this grant, the *patachitra* (a traditional form of Indian painting) is filled with haunting images of a woman's challenges. What is special about these drawings is that they were made as a gesture of thanks by those who were helped by the funds and they provide an invaluable document of the kind of work that still needs to be done.

While the amount of funds given may not be large, the impact of the programs is significant. The small grants vary from Rs 92,000 (\$2,000) to Rs 23 lakh (\$50,000). In fiscal year 2002-03, Rs 3.6 crore (\$786,000) was disbursed

to support a variety of programs across India. The choice of programs and the credentials of the recipient organizations are key to funding projects that can make a lasting impact. Most of the grants vividly bring out the human side of the development equation. They are not intended to make sweeping policy changes. They target small groups and faster improvements in the participants' and community's lives.

"These grants complement our efforts, and they come with no strings attached," says George Mathews, Director of the Institute of Social Sciences (ISS) in New Delhi. The ISS used a grant to organize workshops on democracy for members of the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly. Democracy, as Mathews points out, is a reality in both the U.S. and India, but it is a system that has to be nurtured and cherished.



This poster is part of an NGO-U.S. Embassy effort to eliminate child labor

Grants have also been given to help women understand their legal and political rights, an important area for all countries as they seek to strengthen their civil societies. The 73rd Amendment to the Indian Constitution catapulted women into mainstream politics in 1993 by setting aside one-third of the seats in local councils for women and lower castes. As a result, a million women were brought into the guarded male bastions of administrative bodies across India's villages and towns. Unfortunately, in some parts of

India, the official power that was given to women was often guarded by the husband or other male members of the family. The Guild of Services, a Delhi-based NGO, has made an effort to change this. With a grant from the U.S. Embassy, it organized a workshop to help locally elected rural women become more aware of their legal and constitutional rights.

The success of the three-day program was clear. While some of the women may have been hesitant at the beginning of the workshop, all 386 left with their heads held high. The project helped make women understand constitutional and legal issues and taught crisis management techniques to women from eight states across India. Apart from problems relating to governance, the women also discussed problems relating to

NGO PROJECTS FUNDED BY THE U.S. COVER A WIDE RANGE OF ISSUES

■ **AIDS Prevention Society:** The fund was used to help control the spread of HIV/AIDS in Guwahati.

■ **Adithi:** A Calcutta-based NGO trained 15 young women on a variety of healthcare issues. The group was also trained on how to educate other teenage girls.

■ **Prerana:** Its Mumbai center used the fund to spread awareness on sexual exploitation and trafficking through audio cassettes, TV spots and workshops.

■ **Cini Asha:** This Calcutta-based NGO undertook a project to create AIDS awareness among students and street children through plays and poster competitions.

■ **Indian Environment Society:** A grant sponsored a project for the rehabilitation of more than 50,000 children working in glass factories in Ferozabad, Uttar Pradesh.

■ **Consumer Education and Research Center:** The Ahmedabad-based center was given a grant to launch a website to inform people about the adverse reaction of drugs.

■ **Katha:** This NGO used a grant to provide educational and vocational training to 200 girls in a Delhi slum area.

SHOWING THE WAY

SAVING THE NEXT VICTIM, A FILM ON A WIDOW FIGHTING THE ESTABLISHMENT AND SEEKING JUSTICE, IS LIVING UP TO ITS TITLE.



This Delhi-based NGO has a famous face spearheading it: India's supercop, Kiran Bedi, is the chairperson. Set up in 1995, after Bedi received the Ramon Magsaysay Award for prison reform, the India Vision Foundation has been working on women's empowerment projects and combating drug and alcohol abuse. It also runs a

home for the children of prison inmates.

When Bedi was planning to make a film on domestic violence and the trauma of a single woman fighting the legal and social system, she faced a problem. She lacked funds. She turned to the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Section for a grant.



COURTESY: INDIA VISION FOUNDATION

Kiran Bedi's film takes the message to the masses

Says Bedi: "The funds helped us put the project together. We had the knowledge and the expertise and they gave us the money."

The NGO plans to use the film, *Saving the Next Victim*, to highlight its case for women's empowerment. Says Richa Gupta, Project Coordinator: "It will be used as a training module in our workshops." The film tells the true story of a woman who is wrongly implicated in the murder of her husband. She is victimized both by society and the police. The organization is planning to hold screenings for village communities in different areas and let the people see the real picture. Perhaps it will help save the next victim.

THE WORD



"There are many here who are poor, but you are proving democracy can be used to uplift the poor"

—Former President Bill Clinton, to the women of a cooperative in Rajasthan

alcoholic husbands, rape and dowry. The need for holding such workshops was evident right from the beginning when a burly mustachioed man insisted on registering, claiming his rights as a *sarpanch-pati* (the husband of a councillor).

Udyogini, an NGO that focuses on the economic and social needs of tribal women in India, also received a grant from the U.S. Embassy's Public Affairs Section. The NGO formed self-help groups for 90 tribal women who made a living by collecting forest produce in a small village in Madhya Pradesh. These women have now learned to be more independent by pooling their money and starting a credit association, as well as selling products directly and keeping the traditional middlemen out of the equation. The immediate benefit of the Udyogini project was that a group of women in Madhya Pradesh learned the benefits of micro-credit and of operating their own bank accounts. This element of sustainability and strengthening of civil society is the cornerstone of all development projects funded by these targeted grants.

These initiatives also find sympathetic ears in Washington. When Secretary of State Colin Powell submitted a report titled "Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act" to the U.S. Congress in 2001, one of the points he highlighted was the lack of funding to combat trafficking of children in India. Soon thereafter, Equations, a Bangalore-based NGO, was awarded a grant to study child trafficking in the tourism

industry. The correlation of these events demonstrates a synergy of concerns between the U.S. and India.

The idea behind these grants is not just to eradicate a specific problem but also to create a legacy that survives the grant. After all, self-sustenance, not charity, is the cornerstone of empowerment. In 2002-03, a Lucknow-based NGO, Suraksha, was given a grant of Rs 368,000 (\$8,000) to create human and constitutional rights awareness among underprivileged women. The workshops were held in eight urban slums in the district. Well after the project ended, Suraksha continues to hold similar workshops in other slums.

Most grants are issue-specific. Secularism is a major issue in western India, particularly in Maharashtra and Gujarat. The environment is another area of concern, and grants have been awarded to support wasteland management and water conservation. A project to protect an endangered breed of Himalayan salamanders and also develop local environmental concern and leadership is also under way. Diverse as the projects are, all the grants are driven by one common philosophy: to build civil society and help improve rural and urban India. As most NGO recipients admit, the absence of "ideological interference" from the U.S. Embassy helps. As well known Indian police official and social activist Kiran Bedi said, "We have a grasp of the issues, and they (the U.S. Embassy) understand the issues and can provide the funds."

TROUBLE SHOOTING

AS THE DOWRY SYSTEM STRIKES ROOTS EVEN IN LITERATE KERALA, A PROJECT FOCUSES ON THE EVIL AND LAUNCHES AN AWARENESS CAMPAIGN.

A Kerala-based NGO, Jananeethi, which works for human rights, gender equality and children's rights, was looking for funds to initiate a comprehensive study on the practice of dowry in the state. Jasmine Joseph, Project Coordinator, says about 70% of the marriages in Kerala are "arranged" by family or friends, and this is where the dowry system comes into play. There are brokers who have made an occupation out of match-making and these people are so organized that they even have a fixed fee for their services: 1% of the dowry from the bride's side and 2% from the groom's side.

COURTESY: JANANEETHI



A Jananeethi session in progress

Says Joseph: "This is the first time we have gone for a U.S. grant. We were in need of finances and were told that the American Center has a provision for such projects. We applied and our request was immediately processed." The study took a year to complete. It began as an effort to collect solid data so that the NGO and the Government could develop a plan of action to combat the system of paying dowries. The study has since helped shape the anti-dowry movement in the state spearheaded by Jananeethi. As Joseph says, "We have organized workshops and discussed the findings of the study with opinion-makers so as to create an awareness about the problem." As a relief measure, armed with the findings from the study, Jananeethi has set up a helpline for women victimized in the name of dowry. Since the survey has helped the organization identify the mindsets that promote dowry, its advice is rooted in reality.